

**HEADFORT ARBORETUM AND GEOFFREY THOMAS TAYLOUR,
FOURTH MARQUESS OF HEADFORT (1878-1943)**

The Marquess was born on the 12th June 1878; he died at Cahir Park, County Tipperary, on the 29th January. He was a Fellow of the Linnean Society (1930); gained the Victoria Medal of Honour in 1939; was President of the Royal Horticultural and Arboricultural Society of Ireland (from 1920). He created the once famous arboretum & garden at Headfort, Kells, Co. Meath noted for its conifers, rhododendrons and lilies. Many of his plants are described in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*.

A good account of the gardens at Headfort, published in 1980, can be found in the book **Irish Gardens and Demesnes from 1830** written by Malins and Bowe (note this account was published over 20 years ago):

p74 '...but Headfort's claim to fame today, however, is for the pinetum laid out by Geoffrey Thomas, 4th Marquess of Headfort.....like his fellow peers, Lords Annesley and Powerscourt, he acquired the knowledge of a forester, employed and kept excellent head gardeners, had ample funds, and knew what he wanted. On Great Island, a 10 acre island in the Blackwater, connected to the parkland by a handsome bridge of Headfort oak, he started a pinetum in 1913, advised by Sir Frederick Moore of Glasnevin and W.J. Bean of Kew who planted the first tree, a *Tsuga heterophylla* (Western Hemlock), which today is more than 96 ft by 23 ft 2 in. His head gardener from 1912 to 1929 was William Trevethick, a Cornishman who became famous for raising rhododendrons in other parts of the gardens and for propagating nothofagus, eucryphia and viburnum.

Two wide rides were pegged out on Great Island, the main one 22 yards wide, and the other, a crossing ride, planned as a long vista in a straight line from the distant bridge on the Kells-Drogheda road near the entrance gates - landscaping on a grand 18th century scale but with trees and shrubs which an 18th century planter had never heard of. The arboretum is botanically devised, Kew nomenclature is used throughout (but many of the trees are unlabelled today), and each family has its own area: pines on a high gravel ridge, and spruces lower, on moister ground, with shelter provided by hundreds of Sitka spruce and *Thuja plicata*. Nevertheless, Headfort lies inland, and Great Island is at the lowest point of the park, so spring frosts are sometimes severe, like the 12 degrees Fahrenheit of frost in March, 1928, after many plants had started growth. A rich and deep alluvial soil, slightly acid, of neutral, to a depth of 8 feet in places and a rainfall of 36-50 ins, has produced remarkable growth throughout the years all over the demesne. For example, a *Cupressus cashmeriana*, a beautiful but tender tree with pendulous grey sprays is, according to Bean, the 'tallest example known' in Britain. Today, the arboretum extends to Little Island on the river also, and has grown to 250 species and varieties: high Douglas firs, Wellingtonias and redwoods are particularly fine, especially when relieved by masses of *Rosa moyesii*, banks of azaleas and other flowering shrubs.

The finest hour for Lord Headfort and Mr. Boyle, his Scottish gardener, who succeeded Mr. Trevethick, was in 1931 when he received the award of a RHS gold medal for his collection of conifers, very few of which were more than eighteen years old. Shortly after his award, Lord Headfort planted to the east of the house a small memorial garden to his friend George Forrest, the great botanist-explorer, who had introduced hundreds of rhododendrons ranging from *R. giganteum*, an 80ft tree, to *R. forest* var. *repens*, a creeping plant a few inches high; from *R. sinogrande* with leaves 3ft long and 1 ft wide, to *R. radicans*, with leaves less than half an inch. Forrest died in 1932 in Burma aged forty, 'for love of duty in search of rare plants', on his seventh and what was planned to be his final expedition from the Royal Horticultural Society. All growers of rhododendrons are indebted to him for his discoveries. In this memorial garden at Headfort grow many dwarf rhododendrons found by Forest in the eastern Himalayas, all hardy and flourishing, though grown too large. On the other end of this front of the house to the south-west stands a large thicket of *Thuja plicata* (Western Red cedar), planted in 1881, a huge conical self-layered mass of green stems from rooted layers, with a passage cut through which, when one enters, has a powerful fruity aroma of pineapple from the Thuja but which, unfortunately, leads on the other side to a rubbish dump. It will not be long before many conifers naturalize themselves in our landscapes just as *R. ponticum* has already done....further off at Headfort to the north-west, amidst woods with 40ft rhododendrons, is an American garden enclosed by walls on two sides. Here grow many treasures, including splendid specimens of *Prunus serrula*, *Magnolia grandiflora*, *M. veitchii*, *Nothofagus dombeyi* and *Liriodendron chinensis*. Leading directly out of this stand rows of Irish yews and Wellingtonias, and two huge parallel hedges of yew. 250 years old, but healthy with clean, red stems, clipped but ached and bulging like static elephants - an efficient wind break and excellent background, leading to extensive greenhouses and a little garden house containing records.

Although damage by storms is visible throughout the estate, especially on Little Island, fortunately many of the species were planted in twos and threes so that gaps are not too evident. Arboreta require little weeding and no ploughing, they manure themselves, and provide shade and shelter, but it is essential to preserve shelter belts; otherwise visiting hurricanes from North America (like the infamous 107-knot 'Debbie') penetrate, shearing off trees and shrubs. There is, therefore, a minimum standard of maintenance below which deterioration sets in rapidly, and some smaller demesnes are currently neglected. In high Victorian times these were well managed, but that management has steadily been withdrawn because of financial pressure and lack of skilled labour. Today, therefore, these arboreta are underthinned, unpruned, wind-blown, diseased, and damaged by livestock or ill-conceived felling. The final stage is decay and dereliction; pests and diseases abound; ash, sycamore, hazel and wych-elm coppices alone regenerate. Many trees are dread and dying and the only advantageous result is that dense ground flora and shrub layer develop into valuable wildlife habitats - yet that can also be said of well managed hardwood plantations.....' [Malins and Bowe (1980) Irish Gardens and Demesnes from 1830, pages 74-76]

Further References on the great man's life: Gardener's Chronicle 1943, I, p70; Proc Linn. Soc. 1942-43, p299-300; Who was Who, 1941-1950, p520; Malins and Bowe, Irish Gardens and Demesnes from 1930, p74-76; Nelson and Brady Irish Gardening and Horticulture, 1979, p95; Nelson, Irish Flower Garden, 1984, pp127-28; Nelson and McCracken, Brightest Jewel, 1987, passim.

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